



1. View of the red roofs of Old Town Vilnius
2. Our guide with an amber drink. Amber is a versatile material, used by jewellers, artists and healers
3. Brick and stone façade of the restored Trakai castle

Autumn is in the air and we walk on a carpet of golden yellow leaves. Old women swathed in black shawls sell amber and linen in makeshift stalls. The air is redolent with the smell of cakes – there's a patisserie at every corner.



OLD WORLD CHARM

Capital of Lithuania, Vilnius dazzles you with its historical lineage and touches of quirky modern living. Kalpana Sunder takes an endearing journey replete with beer, bread and basketball.

PHOTOGRAPHS: KALPANA SUNDER

In 1989, a human chain of people standing with their hands linked and singing stretched from Cathedral Square in Vilnius, Lithuania, across Latvia to Tallinn, Estonia, to protest peacefully against the Soviet regime. It was poetically called the 'Baltic Way'. Indeed, Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, has been on the crossroads of East and West, dominated by Russia, Poland and Germany in the course of its tumultuous history. The

coat of arms of the city is very appropriate: A white knight astride his horse with a sword in his hand symbolising the struggle of this city to defend itself against invaders.

The Old Town of Vilnius is one of the largest in Europe, constructed in various epochs of history, and named a UNESCO heritage site for its 'incredible diversity'. It is a colourful mosaic of different styles with higgledy piggledy courtyards, Baroque, Gothic and Russian churches,

and cobblestone alleys. Autumn is in the air and we walk on a carpet of golden yellow leaves. Old women swathed in black shawls sell amber and linen in makeshift stalls. The air is redolent with the smell of cakes – there is a patisserie at every corner. Our Hotel Shakespeare, tucked into a quiet lane, has rooms named after an eclectic mix of writers: Our room is Mark Twain; there is Hemingway, Oscar Wilde, even Rousseau! Each room has books by the author,

1. Native beer is brewed commercially and available in many brands. We enjoy hot beer with fattening bar snacks, *kepta duona* or fried rye bread with garlic and beetroot chips – a local speciality
2. A view of Old Town Vilnius from Gediminas Hill
3. The Bohemian locality of Uzupis
4. Another view of Uzupis
5. Quirky touches abound – nuns in metal on top of the drama theatre



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Vilnius's newfound self-expression is obvious in the quirky touches in the Bohemian quarter of Uzupis; nuns in their black habits cast in iron beckon from the top of the theatre on Gediminas Avenue.

coins from the medieval ages.

Food adventures in Lithuania seem to be a cholesterol feast with potato a staple on the menu. There are the Kugelis, which are dumplings with grated potatoes and eggs baked in the oven. We enjoy the cold beet soup served with herbs, egg and cucumber as well as a plate of hot boiled potatoes. Another local speciality is Bilberry dumplings that look like frostbitten noses. Forto Dvaras is a popular folksy Lithuanian restaurant with a rustic ambience, and waitresses in national costumes serving cepelinai, dumplings of grated potatoes stuffed with cottage cheese or meat with sour cream. Beer is a universal staple in Lithuania: we visit the Prie Katedros Beer restaurant in a cellar on Gediminas Avenue, which brews its own beer with honey.

The town is not just a time warp. Vilnius's newfound self-expression is obvious in the quirky touches all over town. It is evident in the Bohemian quarter of Uzupis; there is colourful graffiti decorating tunnels, walls, alleyways and even entire buildings. With its own bizarre constitution and flags for different seasons, this place is filled with small boutiques and art galleries. I am pleasantly surprised by Literatu Street where I find the 'Wall of Fame' – fans of poets and writers have stuck different works of art in wood, ceramic and glass on the walls as tributes to them. I get introduced to yarn bombing or guerrilla knitting (a kind of street art), and see trees decked in colourful woollen jumpers! Outside the quaint Gurman's tea shop on Pilies Street, which sells more than 100 kinds of tea, I see miniature porcelain teapots embedded in the wall outside. Nuns in their black habits cast in iron beckon from the top of the theatre on Gediminas Avenue. My most endearing image of Vilnius is when I take a walk along the river Neris; I see the banks of the river decked with red flowers beds which say 'As tave myliu' or 'I love you' and on the opposite bank are the letters 'ir as tave' which translates to 'I love you too' in Lithuanian. ☺

memorabilia and wall pictures with quotes.

The city has layers like an onion, which we peel over the next few days: A large Jewish community lived here once, which gave it the sobriquet 'Jerusalem of the East'; it was also the home of Polish Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz. There's an Indian connection too: The Lithuanian language has connections with ancient Sanskrit roots.

It's hard to believe that Lithuania was the last Pagan nation to come under Christian influence in the 14th century. Today, the city has a plethora of churches with their own riveting history, architecture and legends. There is the architectural symphony of the red-bricked St Anne's Church in which Napoleon's cavalry took shelter during the march to Russia, the Baroque beauty of St Peter and Paul, which has over 2,000 stucco statues built by Italian workers depicting Biblical as well as mythical scenes. The show-stopper here is the chandelier crafted from glass and brass beads, styled like a sailing ship. St Casimir's

St Casimir's Church is the oldest Baroque church in the city and its history is convoluted having been used a granary by Napoleon, a Lutheran church by the Germans and as a Museum of Atheism by the Soviets!

Church, named after Lithuania's patron saint, is topped with a golden crown. It is the oldest Baroque church in the city and its history is convoluted having been used a granary by Napoleon, a Lutheran church by the Germans and as a Museum of Atheism by the Soviets! I walk through the Gates of Dawn, the only surviving portal of the city walls which houses the iconic portrait of the Virgin Mary, who is said to have miraculous powers. The city skyline is dominated by the hill with three whitewashed crosses, where they say seven Franciscan monks were tortured for their faith. The Soviets

dynamited it in 1950 and it was then rebuilt as an expression of people's faith.

My 'Jurassic Park moment' is at the Amber gallery on Mykolo Street where I ogle at amber also called 'Baltic Gold'. Amber has been harvested from the shores of the Baltic for centuries. A romantic Lithuanian legend tells the tale of a sea goddess who fell in love with a mortal fisherman. When her husband found out and killed the fisherman, her tears turned into amber! Of course, scientists say it is fossilised resin that oozed from primeval trees. Our guide Inge tells us how to distinguish between genuine Lithuanian amber and cheap yellow copies and persuades us to taste an amber drink with alcohol. Real amber floats in salt water and if rubbed, gives off the fragrance of pine. There are special versions embedded with creatures like centipedes, snails, mosquitoes formed 50 million years ago! Besides the common honey-coloured version, I learn that amber can come in 250 shades. The

Old Town even has an amber spa that touts the healing powers of amber for curing asthma and lowering blood pressure.

I am floored by the collection of carved wooden crosses, magnificent wooden sculptures of sorrowful Christ and traditional Lithuanian sculptures of a man topped by a roof, at the National Museum. Folk artists in Lithuania carved wooden crosses and wayside chapels, which were outlawed under Soviet rule. Inge tells me about Šiauliai and the famous Hill of Crosses, which is the Mecca of Lithuania. Thousands of crosses big and small, cheap and expensive, made from metal and wood line a hillock. Even though the Soviets repeatedly tried to bulldoze the crosses, new ones would appear overnight! The Lithuanians have a special relationship with nature; we are shown the national tree called Rue – the brides here traditionally wear a crown of rue, which is later burned symbolising a transition into adulthood. They say the three famous B's of Lithuania

are Beer, Bread (fried) and Basketball. I see a basketball hoop in almost every yard and one outside a medieval church!

We take a day trip to fairy-tale Trakai, the medieval capital of Lithuania just 28 km from Vilnius. My first glimpse of the red-bricked castle of Trakai takes my breath away – turrets and towers, five sprawling lakes surrounded by pristine greenery and rolling hills. Trakai used to be the capital city of Vytautas the Great who brought the ethnic group called Karaite from Crimea to serve as his bodyguards. These people brought their local food like *kibinai* (meat stuffed pastries), clothing and customs. The town has the typical three window houses – one for God, one for the king and one for yourself. The fortress was badly damaged by the Cossack invaders and rebuilt by the Soviets. Visiting the fortress is a journey back into time – there are crossbows for you to indulge in target practice. There are displays of archaeological finds like axes, wine jars and grinding stones and hoards of